

PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ALGERIA
MINISTRY OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF MOHAMED BOUDIAF - M'SILA

FACULTY OF LETTERS AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

N° :.....



DOMAIN: FOREIGN LANGUAGES
STREAM: ENGLISH LANGUAGE
OPTION: LITERATURE & CIVILIZATION

Empowering Women in Maya Angelou's I Know

Why the Caged Bird Sings

**Dissertation Submitted to the Department of English in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Masters Degree**

Candidates: Ghelab Chaima
Benouaret Asma

Supervised by:
Mrs Abadou Fadila

May 2017

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Publically defended before the following jury:

Mr. Sahed Bachir	University of M'sila	Chairperson
Mrs. Abadou Fadhila	University of M'sila	Supervisor
Miss. Hamouma Chahrazadd	University of M'sila	Examiner

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Dedication:

To my Mother, my three Brothers, my only Sister, and to myself.

Chaima.

Dedication:

To

My father

For all the sacrifices you have made

For everything you have given to us

For all your love and concern

Today I want to thank you for being the dad that you are

My mother

The strong and gentle soul who taught me to believe in Allah. Thank you for always sharing your smiles, your words of encouragement and for all the countless times you have been there for me.

The ones who were always there for me, my sisters Ahlem and Rima, my brothers Billel and Hamza to my best friends: chaima, Djedjiga, Ibtissem, Nesrine, Nadjat, Nafissa and Ahmed .

Asma.

Abstract:

This project is about how the Empowering notion is depicted in Maya Angelou's work, and how she herself can be considered an Empowered woman. In Maya Angelou's autobiographical novel "*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*", the author identifies as a black woman, her trials and tribulations with the other sex as well as the other race; manifesting the existence of Black woman's entity that persists against the biases of society, young Maya struggles against terrible odds to establish her identity as she grows up into a young woman. Her suffering is worsened by a double burden; she is Black and female. These aspects work against her, but she manages to overcome the obstacles they place in her way, and gradually develops a sense of who she is. In order to analyze these matters, a thorough analysis and interpretation will be made of Angelou's novel. To accomplish these aims, Feminist Psychoanalytical theory will be taken into account, and thus, the second part of this project will be dedicated to illustrate the different dimensions of the work from a womanist standpoint regarding the psychological influence. Accordingly, the final conclusion will be drawn that Maya Angelou is an Empowered woman who defies as a Black woman with her writings the prejudices of society; chiefly, race and gender inequalities in order to break the patriarchal rule number one: women should be submissive and passive.

Résumé:

Ce projet porte sur la représentation de la notion d'Habilitation dans le travail de Maya Angelou, et comment elle peut être considérée comme une femme habilitée. Dans le roman autobiographique de Maya Angelou «*Je sais pourquoi chante l'oiseau en cage*», l'auteur identifie, comme femme noire, ses épreuves et ses tribulations avec l'autre sexe ainsi que l'autre race; En manifestant l'existence de l'entité de la femme noire qui persiste contre les préjugés de la société. La jeune Maya lutte contre de terribles chances d'établir son identité afin qu'elle grandisse pour devenir une jeune femme. Sa souffrance est aggravée par un double fardeau; Elle est Noire et Femme. Ces aspects s'opposent à elle, mais elle parvient à surmonter les obstacles qu'ils mettent sur son chemin et développe progressivement un sentiment de qui elle est. Afin d'analyser ces aspects, une analyse approfondie et une interprétation seront faites du roman d'Angelou. Pour atteindre nos objectifs, la théorie psychanalytique féministe sera prise en compte et, par conséquent, la deuxième partie de ce projet sera consacrée à illustrer les différentes dimensions du travail du point de vue féministe en ce qui concerne l'influence psychologique. En conséquence, la conclusion finale sera faite que Maya Angelou est une femme habilitée qui défie en tant que femme noire avec ses écrits les préjugés de la société; Principalement, la race et les inégalités entre les sexes afin de briser la règle patriarcale numéro un: les femmes doivent être soumises et passives.

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Introduction:

People of different backgrounds identify literature each in their own style and purpose, from icons in the world of literature to the very modest passenger in the very same world, but all happen to share one thing in common, that it is rather spiritual than material. Literature for ages has always been the means by which people express their thoughts, stories, experiences, struggles, passions and desires, and by time those become a history, and the history becomes a legacy, and the legacy is inherited from generation to generation, and that is what distinguishes one nation from another. And due to hegemonic influence of dominant nations, some literature linger while others stay in the shadows, some are considered as basic and memorable whilst others are forgotten shortly after reading them, and in between there are some that fight to survive.

Literature of colored people has always been disregarded and despised, even though it was the product of those black writers that were explorers of the white literature in the first place, and were influenced in their 'passion' by numerous figures of the white literary canons « During these years in Stamps, I met and fell in love with William Shakespeare, my first 'white' love; although I enjoyed and respected Kipling, Poe, Butler, Thackeray, and Henley... » (Angelou 13). Black literature has been neglected from American literary history for a long period of time, and Literature of Black women in America has not been acknowledged or even recognised as literature, and got the worst treatment taken as incompetent to different white made literary works.

Black literature is a distinctive component of world literature that is produced, as the name implies, by African-Americans. The genre traces its origins to the slave narratives, and it is continuing today with famous Black authors such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Maya Angelou, whom are ranked amongst the top writers in the United States of America and even as influential figures in the world, this notion was supported by Philip Bader when he stated

that “Maya Angelou is among the most popular and visible contemporary African American authors. While the unflinching optimism of her autobiographical and poetic works has resonated with people of all colors and ethnicities...” (07).

Autobiography as a recent phenomenon has gone a long journey up till now originating with works like Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859) and Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl* (1860), with a profound description of their daily life full of sorrow and awe shedding light only on the sufferings that African Americans had to confront repeatedly as ‘Slaves’.

More than a century later African Americans were no more Slaves and turned to a more contemporary issue which is their quest for Identity. Maya Angelou produced *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) a wonderful fictional autobiography, which is similar with the famous Douglass autobiographical work in its techniques of storytelling and plot development. Namely, when she applies the first-person narrative device so well that readers believe the novel is indeed the historical life story of its author.

Being ourselves not only influenced, but submerged in compassion by *Harriet Jacobs’ Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl*, after having it read and analysed in a literary course as an important reference concerning the literature of minorities, namely, Black literature. As a result when thinking of a topic to entitle our thesis for graduation we could not but follow our compassion that turned to be a passion for this kind of literature.

After a good search and a word of a good advisor we decided to go for a more contemporary yet original theme, that is unlike the old narratives –that were, basically, an attempt to memorise ‘in words’ the hardships of living as a slave by individuals whom were not given the recognition of being humans let alone, of being educated– a more confident

long-term endeavour to proving an existence of an independent entity that is the African-American community.

Influenced by the main status quo back then, that was unpleasant, and in a time when literature was considered as just a piece of writing that does not exceed the field of art, Maya Angelou responded with her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. As a clear argumentation and a call for change, in her work, Angelou stood up not only for her personal beliefs, but for the good of the whole community, influencing many fields in life. Her voice was heard out loud worldwide in a cry for change, on the political level as well as the social one, giving the exemple that Afro-American women are as strong and competent as their white counterparts, and that they can be productive, not only as laborers, but as intellectuals and believers; they only needed to believe in themselves, and to be believed as well.

Taking Maya Angelou's autobiographical novel *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings* as our case study, this work is therefor about how successful she was in her quest for defending Afro-American women's rights by leading a spiritual campaign against all racial and gender prejudices, providing the guidance by refering to her own experience and shedding light on the substantial areas of her life, and how at each time she faced an obstacle, she tended to look for the positive side. And how she could sustain her journey healthy, and grew up with a solid faith in God thanx to many women characters, that made sure they empowered her with their teachings along with love and support, and that helped sharpening her determination constantly, as a result, she was the phoenix that rises out of ashes.

In order to explore the different aspects of Maya Angelou's life and career, we relied on her first autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, paying attention to the numerous motives that made it an outstanding piece of writing, and thus, granted Angelou many titles and awards, together with acknowledging her potentials in making effective writings.

Considering the settings, circumstances, and surrounding characters, both role models and those who were tending to turn down our protagonist; we will be capable of drawing our conclusion and answer the following questions:

1. What are the major factors behind the shift in Angelou's life? And how was she a distinctive role model of her time?
2. To which extent was Empowering Women depicted in Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*? And can we consider Maya Angelou as an Empowered woman herself?

It is hoped that what might emerge from analyzing the notion of empowering women in the selected novel would provide a different dimension to the understanding of the concerns of Afro-American literature, and feminist writings. It is also believed that it would help raise consciousness about Black women's autobiography and its criticism. In addition, the study will initiate readers to know more about Black female experience in America, and at least to think for a moment about battling abuses against women in their respective context. Thus, any work devoted to Afro-American feminist literature will be a contribution to a wider knowledge about Black women. Furthermore, in the feminist-psychoanalytical criticism, there exists a lack of positive readings of Black literature, and the present study is expected to provide a supportive standpoint.

Chapter One: Maya Angelou's life and career

“The idea is to write it so that people hear it and it slides through the brain and goes straight to the heart.”

Maya Angelou

Introduction:

Throughout the diverse and rich American history, literature played a crucial role in the shaping of America's culture, politics, society and women's position in these areas. Many writers, men and even women, were influential, their words were not only powerful but power itself, and their books were the driving force for a better change of the country. Maya Angelou is one of the powerful women who wrote and risked rejection and misunderstanding; she changed lives by sharing her very own journey of change, through powerful words, and through literature. Speaking aloud, writing down and discussing publicly all the sufferings, hardships and experiences of her personal life enabled her to change her awful past in the segregated American South. Many people have got to know and love Maya Angelou through her successful works and great achievements, particularly, her best-known autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

1. Early life of Maya Angelou:

“You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may tread me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I rise”

(The complete collected Poems of Maya Angelou 163)

Maya Angelou acquired the first half of her pen name from her brother, Bailey junior, whose babyish babbling transformed « my sister » into « Miya sista » which later on became « Maya », while the second half was attributed to her former husband Enistasio Tush Angelos. Praised as a multifaceted superstar, Maya Angelou was a dynamic individualist who is often labeled a feminist writer, African American autobiographer, historian, lecturer, journalist, activist, filmmaker, poet, singer, and storyteller, but is most famous as a writer,

editor, essayist, playwright and poet. As a Civil Rights activist, Angelou worked for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X. She was also an educator and served as the Reynolds professor of American studies at Wake Forest University by 1975. Carol E. Neubauer in her article *Southern Women Writers: the New Generation* stated that «Angelou had become recognized not only as a spokesperson for blacks and women, but also for all people who are committed to raising moral standards of living in the United States ».

She set out to whip a variety of challenges, including the language barrier and learned French, Italian, Spanish, Serbo-Croatian, Arabic and Fanti a Ghanaian dialect. She served on two presidential committees, for Gerald Ford in 1975 and for Jimmy Carter in 1977. In 2000, Angelou was awarded the National Medal of Arts by President Bill Clinton. In 2010, she was awarded the presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the U.S by President Barack Obama. Angelou was awarded over 50 honorary degrees.

As she reveals in her most famous work *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Maya Angelou was born Marguerite Ann Johnson on April 4th 1928 in St. Louis Missouri; The second child and first daughter of Bailey Johnson and Vivian Baxter Johnson. Angelou spent her difficult formative years moving back and forth between her mother's and grandmother's place.

Invited to live with her mother in St. Louis at age seven, she was raped by her mother's boyfriend. After his trial and conviction, he was found murdered, and it was said that her uncles killed him, Angelou thought that it was her fault that he was dead by then, consequently, she retreated willingly into silence, which lasted nearly six years. With this Angelou developed a love for language. She read black authors like Langston Hughes, W.E.B Du Bois, as well as canonical works of William Shakespeare and Edgar Allan Poe.

Angelou joined the Harlem Writers Guild in the late 1950s and met James Baldwin and other important writers. It was during this time that Angelou had the opportunity to hear Dr. Martin Luther King speak, inspired by his message, she decides to become part of the struggle of civil rights. Angelou moved to Cairo with her son, and in 1962 to Ghana, in West Africa. When Angelou returned to the United States in the mid 1960s, she was encouraged by author James Baldwin and Robert Loomis an editor at Random House, to write an autobiography. Initially Angelou declined the offers, but eventually changed her mind and wrote *I know why the caged bird sings*.

The book that chronicles her childhood and ends with the birth of her son, gained an immediate success and was nominated for a National Book Award .Angelou was also a prolific and widely-read poet and her poetry has often been lauded more for its depictions of Black beauty, the strength of women, and the human spirit criticizing the Vietnam war, demanding social justice for all than for its poetic virtue.

Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water for I Die (1971) was nominated for Pulitzer Prize in 1972. This volume contains 38 poems, some of which were published in *The Poetry of Maya Angelou* (1969). According to Carol Neubauer in *Southern Women Writers* "the first twenty poems describe the whole gamut of love, from the first moment of passionate discovery to the first suspicion of painful loss." In other poems "Angelou turns her attention to the lives of black people in America from the time of slavery to the rebellious 1960s. Her themes deal broadly with the painful anguish suffered by blacks forced into submission, with guilt over accepting too much, and with protest and basic survival".

As Angelou wrote her autobiographies and poems, she continued her career in film and television. She was the first black woman to have a screenplay (*Georgia, Georgia*) produced in 1972. She was honored with a nomination for an Emmy award for her performance in *Roots* in 1977. In 1979, Angelou helped adapt her book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*,

for a television movie of the same name. Angelou wrote the poetry for the 1993 film *Poetic Justice* and played the role of Aunt June. She also played Lelia Mae in the 1993 television film *There Are No Children Here* and appeared as Anna in the feature film *How to Make an American Quilt* in 1995. According to Philip Bader, “Angelou’s remarkable career came in 1993, when President Bill Clinton asked her to recite a poem for his inauguration *On the Pulse of Morning*. Written specifically for the event, captured the spirit of Angelou’s lifelong efforts toward cultural and spiritual renewal, while also challenging the new President to embrace that vision for the United States and for the world” (07).

Americans all across the country watched as she read "*On the Pulse of Morning*," which begins "A Rock, a River, a Tree" and calls for peace, racial and religious harmony, and social justice for people of different origins, incomes, genders, and sexual orientations. It recalls the civil rights movement and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's famous "I have a dream" speech as it urges America to "Give birth again to the Dream" of equality. Angelou challenged the new administration and all Americans to work together for progress.

Angelou’s poetry often benefits from her performance; she usually recites her poems before spellbound crowds. Indeed, Angelou’s poetry can also be traced to African-American oral traditions like slave and work songs, especially in her use of personal narrative and emphasis on individual responses to hardship, oppression and loss. In addition to examining individual experience, Angelou’s poems often respond to matters like race and sex on a larger social and psychological scale.

Describing her work to George Plimpton, Angelou has said:

"Once I got into it I realized I was following a tradition established by Frederick Douglass—the slave narrative speaking in the first-person singular talking about the first-person plural, always saying I meaning 'we.'

And what a responsibility! Trying to work with that form, the autobiographical mode, to change it, to make it bigger, richer, finer, and more inclusive in the twentieth century has been a great challenge for me” (qtd. in Keni 622).

In 2013 she was the recipient of the Literarian Award, an honorary National Book Award for her contributions to the literary community. She died in 2014 at the age of 86.

2. The Woman in the Maya Character’s Life:

The outstanding female role models assembled in Maya’s flashbacks seemed to have significantly influenced her growth and emotional well-being. From early times, she relies on rigid, firm discipline, and stubborn devotion of Momma Henderson. Afterwards, passing into her mother’s wide open world, a completely different world from the one she is used to, yet was differently exceptional at all levels; later on, meeting the splendid and aristocratic Mrs. Bertha Flowers, the Stamps gentlewoman who lifts Maya from her self-imposed sentence of silence by acknowledging her individuality and promise.

Angelou’s quest of self realization begun only in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou’s treatment of female role models in *Caged Bird* is even more positive than her treatment of Afro-American males. Since it is generally accepted that children of her era developed stronger bonds with their mother rather than their father, it is not surprising to find Angelou focusing on the importance of mother and grandmother. Such focus on mothers is, according to Stephanie Dimitrakopoulos « typical in women’s autobiography due to the innate and archetypal aspects of the women’s psyche, celebrated and codified long ago as the Eleusinian mysteries » (Hagen 69).

These aspects typically are incorporated in women's autobiographies subconsciously, however, it takes an effort to resist praising such outstanding female characters. In the earlier literature by James F. Cooper and Washington Irving, grandmother matriarchs are depicted as silent. Compared to these earlier female stereotypes, Angelou's paternal grandmother, Mrs Henderson, is a symbol of strength; she is no way a weak, passive personality. She is not silent; rather she is the moral center and the voice of authority in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

Being an earth mother, and a figure who is good, kind, nurturing, and protecting. Momma is the foremost influence in Maya's development, for all her matriarchal positioning, is a total realist. From early times, Angelou relies on the firm discipline of Momma Henderson, who insists on clean feet, respectful words, unquestioning obedience, and hard work, as Maya records in the opening of Chapter five « "Thou shall not be dirty" and "Thou shall not be impudent" were the two commandments of Grandmother Henderson upon which hung our total salvation » (27).

Momma is the moral center of the family and especially of Maya's life. Momma raises the children according to firm Christian values and strict rules. She is defined by an unshakable faith in God, her loyalty to her community, and a deep love for everything she touches. Momma teaches Maya how to behave herself around white people. She chooses her words, emotions, and battles carefully, especially when race plays a role. Momma considers herself a realist regarding race relations. She stands up for herself but believes that white people cannot be spoken to without risking one's life.

When three nasty poor white children mocked Momma from the yard one afternoon, Maya watches furiously, but Momma maintains her dignity by not even acknowledging their taunts. Though severe and not given to emotional or affectionate displays, Momma conveys the depth of her love for Maya and Bailey throughout the book. Momma's firm leadership while

still being forced to keep her place, sends a mixed message to the younger generation that required a good deal of maturity and distancing for them to understand, these were two other characteristics of Momma contrast with the matriarchs found in early American literature. Many women turned to religion as a shelter to run from the confinement of their defined roles. Thus, Momma, a natural leader, became an important figure in her church. Moreover, Momma was an entrepreneur, a female rarity in the 1930's and unthought of one hundred years earlier.

Braxton declares that when Maya Angelou wrote about the death of her grandmother, she shifts from a conversational tone, which she generally uses, to a more religious, emotional, passionate « Ah , Momma » (134), crying and lamenting her grandmother's sudden death « I had never looked at death before, peered into its yawning chasm for the face of the beloved » (134), she says « For days my mind staggered out of balance » adding « I reeled on a precipice of knowledge that even if i were rich enough to travel all over the world, I would never find Momma. If i were as good as God's angels and as pure as the Mother of Christ, I could never have Momma's rough slow hands pat my cheek or braid my hair » ending her poetic record of her reaction to the death of her beloved grandmother « Death to the young is more than that undiscovered country; despite its inevitability, it is a place having reality only in song or in other people's grief. » (134).

The overwhelming farwell is not typical of Angelou's writing. Her words here took a whole different path, that is not familiar to her, as if she felt the guilt of having forgotten Momma and that caused her excessive emotions. Maya for most of the book is interested in, and taken by the parenting qualities of Momma Henderson. Eventhough, she does not become a mother until the end of the autobiography.

The mother, Vivian Baxter is another character who influences Maya with her certainty and beauty. Probably the most consistent thematic issue found in Angelou's autobiographies

is motherhood. During much of Maya's childhood her own mother is absent, and her conflicting feelings for Vivian Baxter are transferred to others, especially to Annie Henderson. It may seem somewhat paradoxical that Maya can love and admire the mother who sent her to live with her grandmother.

An examination of Vivian's characterization in the book reveals that Maya respected her mother's enthusiasm for life, the fact that Vivian did not raise her own children, and that she lived her life outdoors did not minimize her love for her children as in the lives of others. She had an unusual understanding of herself. Vivian Baxter Johnson emerges as an extremely vital personality; she was Angelou's role model. Maya absorbed her personal philosophy and frequently quoted her maxims of life. Mrs. Johnson's beauty and zest when she was young envisaged « made her powerful and her power made her unflinchingly honest » (174). And « to describe her would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power, or climbing, falling colors of a rainbow » (49).

Angelou is a city woman and sees no need in her world to conform to the subservient country folk tradition. She can sing and swing at will. Vivian also found it too inconvenient to care for her two children or found it too incompatible with her life style. She finds an excuse to send Maya and Bailey back to Stamps. Angelou sees her mother as « a woman too beautiful to have children » (54). She often describes her mother through images of lightness or floating: for instance, she moved « like a pretty kite that floated just above my head » (54). Vivian captivated both children Maya and Bailey with her worldliness and elation not until her early twenties did Maya see herself as having separated herself emotionally from her mother. She told novelist Rosa Guy: « I began to see her as a character I would have read about » (221). At the end of the narrative, Maya returns to her mother, Vivian Baxter a city woman, blackjack dealer and free spirit. She is able to draw from Vivian Baxter the strength and the support she needs as she prepares to have a baby.

In the years that followed her return to Stamps after being raped, Maya's existence was lifeless, as she refers to it: « an old biscuit , dirty and inedible » (93) until she meets Mrs. Bertha Flowers, who was deemed « the aristocrat of black stamps » (93) says Maya when giving us a flash of her first impression about her « She had the grace of control to appear warm in the coldest weather, and on the Arkansas summer days it seemed she had a private breeze which swirled around, cooling her » (93). Maya says that this woman threads her life line « Then I met, or rather got to know, the lady who threw me the first life line » (93).

Maya's love of reading begins early, having read Shakespeare and others at six, but Mrs. Flowers who through love and books nurtures Maya's love of reading and urges her to speak again as Mrs. Flowers tells her « words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with shades of deeper meaning » (95). On this day Marguerite speaks again for the first time in a year. Mrs. Flowers « was one of the gentlewomen i have ever known, and has remained through my life the measure of what a human being can be » (91). From the start, Mrs. Flowers appealed to her because she was like « women in English novels who walked the moors with their loyal dogs racing at a respectful distance » (92). Above all « she made me proud to be a Negro just by being herself » (92).

Mrs. Flowers joined the world of Stamps to the world of literature, embodied in her person the dreams that shaped Marguerite's imagination, for Marguerite, under Mrs. Flowers tutelage, formal education became salvation. But even as she introduced Marguerite to the delights of *Tale of two cities*, Mrs. Flowers instructed her to recognize the beauties and sense of blackfolk culture. Ignorance and illiteracy, she insisted, should not be confused together « she encouraged me to listen carefully to what country people call mother wit that in those homely sayings was couched the collective wisdom of generations » (97).

Maya learned that language, the human form of communication, alone separates man from the lower animals, and words, acquire meaning by being spoken, and books should be read

aloud. Angelou thus, represents Mrs.Flowers as bridging the gap between oral and literary culture and the black community of Stamps. For Maya Angelou, Mrs.Flowers was a woman who provides spiritual and intellectual guidance upon her return from a year long stay with her real mother in St.Louis, where at seven she was the victim of sexual abuse. Angelou was invited in the home of Mrs.Bertha Flowers, she writes « when she choose to smile on me, I always wanted to thank her ... she was one of few gentlrwomen i have ever known, and has remained throught my life, the measure of what a human being can be » (78).

Mrs.Flowers taught Maya tolerance for others, love for books, and most importantly, self-esteem. Angelou remarks « I was liked, and what difference it made. I was respected not as Mrs.Henderson's grandchild or Bailey's sister but for just being Marguerite Johnson » (85). Mrs.Flowers the primary example of feminism in Stamps, the independent with economic resources to survive on her own, she respects herself and cares about other women, to the extent that she takes control of Maya's education, helping her to read and regain her own voice. Witout her maya would never have become a writer.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, which starts with the separation of the daughter and her mom, ends in their bonding, the mother /daughter /infant triangle of the ending scene marks the completion of Maya's journey to womanhood. Eventhough she was nevertheless frightened, dependant and concerned about what the futur holds, she showed signs of being able to control her life as a Black woman.

3. Spiritual Icon:

“A woman's heart should be so hidden in God that a man has to seek Him
just to find her.”

(Maya Angelou Quotes)

In a 2013 article by Chelsea Brasted at the Times-Picayune entitled “A night with Maya Angelou”. When interviewed Angelou responded to a question –about whether spiritualism was something that has inspired her over the years– with positive acknowledgement, showing how happy, pleased, and delighted she was saying so. Stating furtherly that it was a wonderful thing to know that there is something to know, there is something greater than she was, and that is God itself.

The presence of religion along with education as a corner stone in the building of Angelou’s person is clear to whoever reads her works, she uses a very eloquent yet realistic style, through which she tells the detailed sequence of her life stages, and in each stage she illustrates the difficulties she confronted and how she found the solution in what she aquired so far concerning religion and finding the way to God.

This devine journey that led Angelou to a whole different level of spirituality ending up as an icon started when she moved with her brother to live with their paternal grandmother Anni Henderson back in Stamps, Arkansas, as mentioned in the very first pages of the first volum ‘Caged Bird’. As Momma raised them for most of their childhood, she was the moral center of the family and especially of Maya’s life. Momma raised the children according to firm Christian values and strict rules. She was defined by an unshakable faith in God, her loyalty to her community, and a deep love for everything she touches.

« Our Father, thank you for letting me see this New Day .Thnak you that
you didn’t allow the bed i lay on last night to be cooling boarded, nor my

blanket my winding sheet .guide my feet this day along the straight and narrow, and help me to put a bridle on my tongue. Bless this house, and everybody in it. Thank you, in the name of your son, Jesus Christ, Amen »

(Angelou 07)

Describing delicately and accurately her first days with her grandma, little Maya very excited refers to the daily prayers said by Momma, either early in the morning when she wakes up using no alarm clock, or when getting together to have a meal. And even when being asked about her crippled son, Momma shows no resentment against the baby-sitter who dropped him when he was three causing him a permanent injury, but rather attributing it to his already destined fate « ...just God who allowed the accident » (11)

In the process of attuning the children to the southern living of the blacks, Momma tends to stretch the context of educating them not only in the house, but through making them engage in the Store that was considered as a center of social life in the black town. Maya got an exclusive chance to experience at a very young age a community full of varieties and responsibilities, by weighing, excluding, and depositing merchandises Maya became in her words « absolutely accurate » (15) and gained the appreciation of the costumers so that whenever mis-laboring she reconsiders herself « Then i would quietly but persistently punish myself. For every bad judgment... » (15)

Maya Angelou was a student of The Unity church, she first discovered it in her twenties after her voice coach and mentor Frederick Wilkerson invited her to a service there. Founded in 1889 Unity is a Christian movement that emphasises affirmative prayer and education as a path to spirituality. Angelou described how reading the line "God loves me" multiple times positively impacted her in a 2013 interview with Oprah:

"It still humbles me that this force that makes leaves and fleas and stars and rivers and you, loves me. Me, Maya Angelou," she said in the interview.

"It's amazing. I can do anything. And do it well. Any good thing, I can do it. That's why I am who I am, yes, because God loves me and I'm amazed at it. I'm grateful for it." (Oprah Winfrey)

Angelou explained how her faith gave her courage to pursue opportunities:

"Well, I believed that there was a God because I was told it by my grandmother and later by other adults. When I found that I knew not only that there was God but that I was a child of God, when I understood that, when I comprehended that, more than that, when I internalized that, ingested that, I became courageous" (Oprah Winfrey)

Angelou was open about her faith and Christianity, but that didn't stop her from writing about actions she took that most consider wrong. For example, her experience with drugs and having been a madam for prostitutes, Angelou explained that people must confront their bad actions so they can forgive themselves, she added:

«As soon as you admit it, you can be like the prodigal son, the prodigal daughter. Get up and go home wherever home is. Get up and go to a safe place ... But you can't get up unless you see where you are and admit it»
(*The Teen Talking Circle Project*).

Thus ,for Angelou forgiveness is the practical phase of faith starting by forgiving the self as a first and basic step forward to being positive and productive and do good things .Having experienced a dramatic life, including being raped as a child, Angelou grew up learning 'the hard way' and came to conduct her own theory of living, that is very important for every human being to forgive him/herself, which is the one and only means to make one move on and be well to do well saying « if i'd known better, i'd have done better » (*The Teen Talking Circle Project*), because as long as we are living, it is inevitable to make mistakes ,and at each time one may produce any kind of mistake they sooner should ask for forgiveness and forgive

the self and the other, so that they won't live in the shadows of guilt, those that prevent them from seeing their glory in their mirrors and be happy, and consequently, be of no goodness to the self nor to those around.

Accordingly, spirituality found a fertile land in Maya's heart, fueled by her evident wisdom and maturity, as well as her strong faith; Maya Angelou was inevitably a spiritual icon by excellence.

4. Political Activism:

In a career spent in many activities and different domains, Angelou has never been away from politics. Maya wanted to help protect the rights of African Americans. Living in New York, she joined the Harlem Writers Guild « it was a group of young black writers who wrote articles and books that encouraged equality » (Brown 34, 35) where she met James Baldwin and many other writers who were such a big influence on her.

During this time, she had the opportunity to hear Martin Luther King's speech. Inspired by his powerful words, she started to think of a way to be a part in the struggle of civil rights. By his request, she became the northern coordinator and ran the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1960. It was a great honor for her to join the civil rights movement and to fight against apartheid. She then wrote and directed a show called *Cabaret for Freedom* which made much profit that went to Dr. Martin Luther King's organization SCLC¹.

She was also politically active during this period helping the organization to rise and fulfill its objectives to help the African Americans obtain some rights. After that, she fell in love with the South African civil rights activist, Vusumzi Make. The couple moved, with Angelou's son, to Egypt, where « she worked as an editor for the *Arab Observer* » (Kite 87).

¹ Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) is an African-American civil rights organization, which is closely associated with its first president, Martin Luther King Jr, had a large role in the American Civil Rights Movement.

After a while, the relationship with Make ended, she and Guy moved to Ghana, where she worked as the assistant administrator of the school of Music and Drama at the University of Ghana and also contributed to the Ghanaian Times Newspaper. Indeed, she met there some of the most influential people of her life, like W.E.B. Du Bois, Julian Mayfield and Malcolm X.

The latter was such a close friend and another source of inspiration. She remained deeply invested and engaged in struggles for freedom and civil rights in both Africa and the United States. In 1964, Angelou returned to America to help Malcolm X build his new Organization of African American Unity, but unfortunately, shortly afterward he was assassinated.

Three years later, she was asked by King to organize a march. However, Martin Luther King was also assassinated on her 40th birthday (April 4) which was a mighty shock for her. During these rough times, inspired and supported by Baldwin, her writing career shove off with a big and full force. Moreover, she gained more reputation by 1993, when she wrote her poem entitled « *On the Pulse of the Morning* », and recited it at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton:

A Rock, A River, A Tree

Hosts to species long since departed,

Marked the mastodon,

The dinosaur, who left dried tokens,

[...]

Armed for slaughter

The Rock cries out to us today,

You may stand upon me,

But do not hide your face.

[...]

Here on the pulse of this new day

You may have the grace to look up and out

And into your sister's eyes,

And into your brother's face,

Your country,

And say simply,

Very simply

With hope

Good morning!

(The complete collected Poems of Maya Angelou 269)

With these inspirational words, she successfully proved her skills as speaker and a real politician, stating her feelings and thoughts which call for hope, change, and equality; she spoke for and to the Americans. She, thus, marked a returning to the oral traditions and great speeches of such heroic leaders like Martin Luther king, Frederick Douglass, and Malcolm X.

In addition to this, with her spoken and written powerful words she influenced many politicians, political parties and arenas across the United States as whole and gave a literary and political voice especially to women like Oprah Winfrey, Alicia keys and Martin Luther King's wife; as mentioned in an article by *The National* entitled: "*Maya Angelou's cultural impact not forgotten*".

« A former singer and dancer , as well as once being the first black streetcar conductor in San Francisco , she also put her imprint on the new world of

celebrity, mentoring Oprah Winfrey, instructing Alicia Keys in lining out a call-and-response form of singing popular in Southern black churches »

(Associated Press)

Ellen Killoran in her article entitled “*Winfrey and Angelou's troubled histories were uncannily similar*” in The International Business Times; repeats to us how Oprah Winfrey proclaimed repeatedly that far from being her mentor, Angelou was a mother, a sister, friend and a teacher who was one of the greatest influences in her life. She also declared that she felt connected to Maya Angelou when she first met her on the pages of her autobiography *I know why the caged bird sings* “Meeting Maya on those pages was like meeting myself in full”, she wrote in her *O Magazine* “For the first time, as a young black girl, my experience was validated”, and she added after Maya’s death “She will always be the rainbow in my clouds.”

Angelou campaigned for the Democratic Party in the 2008 presidential primaries, giving her public support to Senator Hillary Clinton. In the run up to the January Democratic Primary in South Carolina, the Clinton campaign ran advertisements featuring Angelou’s endorsement, attempting to rally support in the Black community. But Obama won the South Carolina primary. When Clinton’s campaign ended, Maya Angelou put her support behind Senator Barak Obama, who became the first African American president of the United States. She stated: “We are growing up beyond the idiocies of racism and sexism” (Ubani 240).

Angelou’s political activism was filled with her engagement and devoting herself to help liberate black Americans and to spread out freedom and equality all over the world as her unique voice was heard worldwide. She received the 2010 Presidential Medal of Freedom by Barak Obama. Yet her influence was not restricted only to politics or the civil rights but encompassed more than that.

Conclusion:

Maya Angelou is a phenomenal woman by excellence having incarnated many important roles in her life being, a poet, novelist, producer, and actor, musician, and civil rights activist; And in the life of many others being, an educator, mentor, friend, and advisor. Her best-selling book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* gave her this fame and legacy.

It is an autobiographical novel that brings about her experiences as a child in the segregated south, and also in St.Louis and San Francisco with her mother. Maya suffered of being a little Black girl at a time when the world was dominated by white people. As well as, she was raped at a very young age. However, the courage, love, and strong spirit that she grew up with, along with the ideas of great authors like Shakespeare, allowed her to free the little caged bird.

That pioneering work influenced many people and arenas starting with politics, feminism, children and everyone who reads the book. She gives a literary voice to Black women writers and became a reading list staple in America. She inspired many women all over the world who are looking to survive racism, sexism, traumatic childhoods and even many other issues - that were not mentioned in the novel- just by taking her own triumphant experience as reference. Her work will remain an inspiration for today's youth and generations in the whole world.

Chapter Two: Empowering notion in Maya

Angelou's Caged Bird

"All of my work is meant to say, 'You may encounter many defeats but you must not be defeated.' In fact, the encountering may be the very experience which creates the vitality and the power to endure."

Maya Angelou

Introduction:

The novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* depicts the different events in Angelou's life that influenced her, evoked her understanding, and helped her to liberate herself from the shackles of the society. Maya's rape, subsequent muteness, her interaction with Mrs. Flowers, mocking of white girls, her visit to the dentist, Maya's month living in a Junkyard, her struggle to become a San Francisco street-car conductor, doubt about her sex, her graduation, and accepting motherhood, all these were the incidents that shaped her personality and paved the path to understand life.

Throughout her book, Angelou admits her true self. Women writers do not dare talk about their marginalized lives and conditions through central characters until the mid-twentieth century, but Maya Angelou takes the stories to public notice. The power of her pen is the ultimate product of Maya's personality. Maya is no longer ashamed of her race or sex; instead she is proud and gains confidence as a "Negro female". Her struggle and triumph over prejudices, and barriers like racism, sexism, personal desolation, loneliness, and low self-image of herself illuminate her strength and beauty.

1. About *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*:

African-American literature scholar Selwyn R. Cudjoe presents a favorable conception of the importance of African American autobiographical works stating:

"The practice of the autobiographical statement, up until the contemporary era, remains the quintessential literary genre for capturing the cadences of Afro-American being, revealing its deepest aspirations and tracing the evolution of the Afro-American psyche under the impact of slavery and modern U.S. imperialism" (6).

However, although the long history of autobiography written in the African American voice, the voice was almost exclusively a male voice until the second half of the last century. Cudjoe notes that "...the Afro-American woman remained in all-pervading absence until she was rescued by the literary activity of her Black sisters..." (7).

By the age of 40, Maya Angelou had already many careers, working as a journalist, poet, civil rights activist, and singer. In the late 1950s, she joined the Harlem Writers Guild, where she met a number of important Afro-American authors, including her friend and mentor James Baldwin.

In her article entitled *11 Facts about I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Joy Lanzendorfer tells us about the story behind Maya Angelou's decision to write down her life story, and how a dinner party with James Baldwin led to a publishing deal:

« Baldwin took her to a dinner party at the cartoonist Jules Feiffer's house. Angelou charmed guests with stories of her childhood; the next day, Feiffer's wife called Editor Robert Loomis at Random House and said that he should get Angelou to write a memoir. When he brought it up, Angelou said, 'Absolutely not'. Loomis replied, "It's just as well, because to write an autobiography as literature is just about impossible". Angelou, who liked a challenge, said, "I'll start tomorrow" »

On April 4th 1968, on Maya Angelou's birthday, Martin Luther King Jr was murdered in Memphis, Tennessee. Angelou was deeply depressed in the months following King's assassination and it was because of her grief at his death that Maya wrote *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The title of the book was taken from the poem *Sympathy*, by Paul Laurence Dunbar; He was the son of escaped slaves and wrote about a bird in a cage which has beaten the bars until its wings are bruised. Its song is not a song of joy, but a prayer for freedom:

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings
I know why the caged bird sings!

(Dunbar).

Representing Black women of her time, Angelou viewed herself as a locked bird and referred to the cage with the different prejudices of society. Therefore, she considered her novel a holy quest as sacred as a prayer, and as crucial as an issue of fate. Accordingly, Marcia Ann Gillespie et al describes how the author's thoughtfulness and accuracy were fruitful stating that:

"During the months she spent writing the book, Angelou practically withdrew from the world. She'd set the bar high. Her ambition was to write a book that would honor the Black experience and affirm the 'human spirit'. She more than achieved her goal. She wrote a coming-of-age story that has become a modern classic."(101).

On the other hand her personal mentor James Baldwin maintained that her book "liberates the reader into life" and called it "a Biblical study of life in the midst of death" (qtd. in Opal 56).

Cudjoe calls Angelou's depiction of the rape "a burden" of *Caged Bird*, a demonstration of "the manner in which the Black female is violated in her tender years and ... the 'unnecessary insult' of Southern girlhood in her movement to adolescence" (12).

2. A Feminist psychoanalytical reading of Angelou's works:

“If I could take all my parts with me when I go somewhere, and not have to say to one of them, ‘No, you stay home tonight, you won’t be welcome,’ because I’m going to an all-white party where I can be gay, but not Black. Or I’m going to a Black poetry reading, and half the poets are anti-homosexual or thousands of situations where something of what I am cannot come with me. The day all the different parts of me can come along, we would have what I would call a revolution » (*Maya Angelou Quotes*)

In his analysis of Maya Angelou's autobiographical series of novels, Cudjoe underlines the fact that autobiography has often been chosen as means of self expression by African Americans, stating that “The Afro-American autobiographical statement is the most Afro-American of all Afro-American literary pursuits.” (qtd. in Megna 1).

The illustration of woman of color has been an issue of hot debate among feminists, psychoanalysts, Postcolonial and Cultural Studies' experts. The publication of Angelou's novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in 1969 explores the representation of the black woman. The novel reviews some of the typical notions of “blackness and feminine which are propagated in the idiom of the colonizer” (Choudhry et al 466). Thus, the endeavor of Black women writers of the nineteenth and the twentieth century was to challenge the stereotyped image of Black women.

Being marginalized, it was difficult for the Black woman to write about herself as the central character. Accordingly, unlike her male counterpart she was not seen as representative of society. Freidman suggests that “this sexist discrimination was one of the main reasons women have a double consciousness. Therefore, being a woman in a man's world, being black in white's world means being marginalized by the majority of society.” (qtd. in Music 14). But Angelou's autobiographical novel breaks away from the tradition in a brave and successful attempt presenting blackness from the inside out.

Angelou's writings reflect her femininity and express her strong and powerful personality as a woman, and even more importantly as a black woman. *Caged Bird* raises a number of questions regarding feminist reading taking into account the psyche. Questions such as whether the character of main focus is strong, aware female, whether female characters bond with each other in the patriarchal society, and how are these related to the psychological well being of the main character.

According to Lupton the latter subject matter is highly reflected through child/mother/grandmother relationship when he states that:

“The essential and fundamental theme of feminism is motherhood, therefore Maya Angelou, who divulges her story as a granddaughter, daughter and finally as a mother herself, impersonates various stages of feminine development, hereby making the *Caged Bird* a feminist writing with motherhood topic as it's cornerstone” (71).

Her strong relationship with her grandmother and later on with her mother is mainly built upon respect, appreciation, love, and unquestioned obedience; and that is extensively highlighted throughout the novel.

By showing not only the tough situations she had to experience, but also how at each time she found the solution with the help of her kindhearted grandmother, or her wise mother, e.g. Maya's visit to the dentist, her announcement of pregnancy to her mother, and even the time she spent living in the junkyard about which she says: “After a month my thinking processes had so changed that I was hardly recognizable to myself. The unquestioning acceptance by my peers had dislodged the familiar insecurity. Odd that the homeless children, the silt of war frenzy, could initiate me into the brotherhood of man. After hunting down unbroken bottles and selling them with a white girl from Missouri, a Mexican girl from Los Angeles and a Black from Oklahoma, I was never again to sense myself so solidly outside the pale of the

human race. The lack of criticism evidenced by our ad hoc community influenced me, and set a tone of tolerance for my life” (255)

Furthermore, answering the question whether or not, the main character of the book, Maya Angelou, is a strong and aware woman, on the contrary to Lupton’s invalid declaration and for which he had no argument that “Caged Bird does not project a strong, positive image of women” (72), we argue, that the stubbornness and determination of little Maya to keep silent for five long years after being raped at the age of eight, constructs the naturally firm and powerful character of Angelou at a very young age. Angelou is regarded as a potential feminist due to her awareness of the destructive forces working against her in the society.

The topic of female bonding relations is significant in the *Caged Bird*. Maya would have never become a writer without Mrs. Flowers, who she develops a close relationship to and who helps Maya to read and to regain her voice. Consequently, Flowers is also a symbol of feminism, as she is self-respectful, financially independent, caring and helpful of other women, including young Angelou.

The book finishes with Maya returning home as a mature, independent, and a psychologically healthy grown woman, who had known well not only how to heal her wounds, but even how to learn from her scars when she says “Anything that works against you can also work for you once you understand the Principle of Reverse.” (*Maya Angelou Quotes*). And about which Lupton comments “Reuniting with her mother, thereby, completing “her transition into womanhood” (73).

Furthermore, starting with domestic issues and finishing with universal quest, such as race, cultural differences and femininity, Angelou could successfully maintain control over the unity of her subject matter and the themes she tackles, and that goes hand in hand with her self-recognition and maintaining her place as a black female in a patriarchal white man’s world. Ghani and Naz in their article “*Race, Feminism and Representation: an Inquiry into*

Maya Angelou's Poetry” argue that “Angelou’s work, not only manifest control as a whole” for her aim is not personal benefit “but also feminist psyche in control of femininity, while embodying woman on three different levels: racial, biographical and universal” (98). Thus, Angelou was representing Black Women and feminism as she declares that:

“The Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power. The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic admiration.” (273).

In other words she states « All my work, my life, everything I do is about survival, not just bare, awful, plodding survival, but survival with grace and faith. While one may encounter many defeats, one must not be defeated » (qtd. in McPherson 131)

Angelou’s mission was considered accomplished by Pat Parcker as she declares that “Maya Angelou’s story is the story of a black girl and a black woman’s victory over racism. It is also the story of the march to freedom of African Americans” (qtd. in Sheppard 10)

3. Empowering notion:

“I think women have to develop courage. You’re not born with courage, but you develop it. Try to develop your courage with smaller things. [...] One way to develop courage is to not entertain company who debase you. Don’t laugh at someone who is laughing at you or putting you down. Take offense. When someone says ‘I hope you won’t be offended,’ then you probably will be”

(Maya Angelou Quotes)

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings being the first of seven volume self narrated life story, exclusively, highlights the age between three to sixteen of its author, this period is very crucial and transformational in the life of any person, and it is according to many factors; affecting this period that the personality and future path is clearly set. The novel sheds light on a lost but later on regained Motherhood. It also contains Toni Morrison’s ‘maternal standpoint’ which is interpreted as area of power. Morrison believes that “preservation, nurturance, cultural bearing, and healing which are seen as mother’s duty all are essential for the empowerment of children.” (qtd. in O’Reilly 70).

The challenge for Morrison’s mothers therefore, is not how to maintain or combine motherhood and work at the same time, which is the case for nowadays working women, but rather how, in the face of racism and sexism, to best provide the Motherwork both in and outside the home.

In Morrison’s view, what a mother can do is to provide a Homeplace for her children, because it heals many of the wounds caused by racist predominance. However, in case the mothers are absent, because of some social problems as divorce, death, imprisonment, or as they have to deal with slavery, these responsibilities all are shifted to Othermothers. Thus the practice of Othermothering, as it developed from West African traditions, became in African

American culture a strategy of survival to ensure that all children, regardless of whether the biological mother was present or available, are to receive the mothering that delivers psychological and physical wellbeing and makes empowerment possible.

From the beginning of the novel, Angelou was separated from her mother and sent to live with her severe but at the same time kind grandmother, the continuous dislocation of little Maya results her sense of loneliness and isolation, on the other hand, it is no surprise that she loses her sense of self because she has no real mom to teach her about African American ancient properties and funk. By ancient properties and funk, Morrison refers back to African American values and also a place that a mother must provide for her daughter to preserve her from both racist and sexist world of white.

Living with her grandmother and uncle while seeing that beauty is only for the whites, Maya's idea is brought about to change, Momma teaches her how to compliment her own culture and stick to ancient properties. Maya spends most of her life with her grandmother and her beloved brother; she gradually develops major respect for her grandmother's behavior and strength. Maya believes that Momma, besides being a symbol of endurance and hope, she also reinforces the serious values of African American families.

Although she is rigid in her punishment, she pays affection to her throughout her childhood and early adolescence. So as a grandmother her role is strong and mature since she got to put her grandchild in picture about the racial inequality. Also far from her grandmother, and regardless to the fact that she lived in a harmful context, Maya approves for that society she lives in because community mothering and Othermothering strengthened her in all the steps of her life.

Earlier in her life when Maya enters the school, she had to confront the behavior of the manager who is white. The manager is impassive in humiliating the black students especially

black girls by his unreasonable and obstructive speech that black girl must stay at home, do the dishes and do the low jobs. What is significant according to Mickle is:

“ The fact that in spite of all the harsh treatment and the white dominated power that the students get from the White minister; they derive strength from their national anthem and music. So black people are able to create with their music an aesthetic community of resistance, which in turn encourage and nurture a political community of active struggle for freedom”

(49)

Another episode of Maya's life in which she needed help, and again found her grandma by her side, is the time when she had toothaches and needed to see a doctor. Because Maya was told earlier by her grandmother about racial prejudices, that her doctor may not welcome her, she decides to go with her grandmother. When Momma takes Maya and speaks with doctor about her tooth, the doctor refuses to cure her though her grandmother for once did a good favor to him and instead he commences to bother them by dirty words, “I'd rather stick my hands in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's” (Angelou 189). Although the doctor showed offensive behavior, still Maya had no fear since she had a warmhearted mother who defended her in front of the white rude dentist.

While Maya was living with her grandmother, she used to see the white girls wearing beautiful clothes and felt negatively unlike, having to internalize that in her heart, Maya was frustrated, and again her grandmother helped her overcome the issue, by referring to it as the absurd American consumerism, and teaching Maya that she had to stick to her cultural properties as to cooking, sewing and cleaning and forget the false assumptions on white American dream.

Bell Hooks believes that:

“Sexism has always been a political stance mediating racial domination, enabling black men to share a common sensibility about sex roles and the importance of male domination. Clearly it has equated freedom with manhood and manhood with the right of men to have indiscriminate access to the bodice of women; it has been socialized to consider patriarchal affirmation of rape as an acceptable way to maintain male domination” (59).

Thus, away from the different social prejudices that she had to live with, Maya’s experience with rape at a very young age was such a horrific psychological collapse, upon which, little Maya came back to the lap of Momma, and she in her turn took her to Mrs.Flowers to teach her about literature and make her recover from her trauma, and speak once again.

Mrs.Flowers’ inspiration to Maya was not limited to only love of literature as an independent world, in which she can be and do what she cannot in reality, but surpassed that to give her the powers to believe in herself without having to be someone else or belong to some group of people, but rather convinced her that she can be and she already is exceptional in everything she is and everything she has, and hence, she can be loved just because of whom she is. Therefore, it was via Momma and Mrs.Flowers that Maya revives her life and she gets to know cleverly and thoroughly about the world that if a girl wants to survive the sexist and racist world, she must have a mother to help and she also should know who she is.

Another image of empowerment in the next stage of her life, Maya moves to California to live with Vivian Baxter, and as a first initiative from her behalf, she sends her to study in the school of white children, on the one hand, to make her aware of how much racism and sexism are hurtful to Black women, on the other hand, and most importantly to learn her how to best resist those oppressions on her own.

Effectively, it was the case when Maya met children of different nationalities and origins; she never let anyone despise her blackness, and whoever behaves rudely towards her she shows courage to answer them back. In addition to that Maya was taking dancing and singing classes. Consequently, it was during her stay at her mother's that Maya enjoyed mobility, liberty, and gained self reliance.

Maya reaches a higher level of empowerment, when she decides to go to work, considering that her mother will support her because she herself believes in self reliance and will be appreciating her daughter's determination. Barbara Turnage argues in her article entitled *The Global Self-Esteem of an African-American Adolescent Female and Her Relationship with her Mother* that "a black daughter always is injected a high self-esteem and knowledge of her African American heritage through her mother, thus she is an advocate provide for her daughter a sturdy bridge to cross over on" (qtd. in O'Reilly 154).

Even when Maya discovers that the cable car company will not hire African Americans, she stubbornly persists, haunting the streetcar office until she is hired. Hence, Vivian's own independence and determination were among the qualities Maya follows in her journey to maturity, self reliance, and self esteem about which she says:

"I had never driven a car before, but I had watched carefully and my mother was declared to be the best driver in San Francisco. She declared it, at least. I was superbly intelligent and had good physical coordination. Of course I could drive. Idiots and lunatics drove cars; why not the brilliant Marguerite Johnson?" (237)

And accordingly, she was the first African American streetcar conductor in San Francisco. As the title refers to, the author's achievements of empowering self awareness in the face of personal injury were very well portrayed. Collins concludes that "children learn at home how to identify and challenge racist practices and it is at home that children learn of their heritage

and community. At home they are ‘Empowered’ to resist racism, particularly as it becomes internalized” (qtd. in O’Reilly 11).

Conclusion:

African American autobiography is a personal manifestation of a self experience. Although autobiography may sometimes be a little bit opaque; it is portrayed from the memory of the writer and generally represents authentic experiences of that person in a society. Angelou's work is then, a presentation of the life of a black woman who has lived in the south and in the urban north, who has lived in Africa, and has traveled Europe. She has experienced poverty and despair, and she has been granted high honors and titles. Her work is the expression of those experiences and sensations through the eyes of a Black woman.

Conclusion:

As we reached the final part in conducting our thesis, the understanding of the notion of Empowerment became more comprehensible to us. As we all are born primitive and through our lives develop to become more advanced and not vice versa; same thing for Empowerment, it is through our life experiences both failures and triumphs, that we become stronger and wiser. The Empowered Woman is the one who investigates the truth and do not accept the rules of a manipulated society; in Maya Angelou's case the issue is imbedded in her struggles against racism and sexism.

Through this project it becomes obvious that Maya Angelou is an Empowered Woman. Our consideration is based on information we gained after conducting a research on her life. However; mainly after closer analysis of her first volume of autobiographies, the two major issues she has battled throughout her life and is still continuing to do so through her everlasting writings; are the racial and gender inequality and that is deeply manifested in her creative work. After investigating *I know why the caged bird sings* we can confidently conclude that her novel presents the powerful character of the author as someone who dares to confront and overcomes the opponent.

Reading the works of literary icons such as Shakespeare at a very young age was not something given to anyone, let alone to a Black girl in the segregated south at that time. Together with the passion that little Maya had for reading, she had the chance to meet with the "aristocratic" teacher and friend of Momma, Mrs. Flowers who helped her not only gain back her voice but prompted her already existing capacities in the first place, and then gave her something extra to make her unleash her powers. In her novel Maya Angelou depicts the Black woman as being powerful even though suppressed, beautiful even though despised, independent even though oppressed, creative and productive even though underestimated,

impersonating the notion of Empowered women being sophisticated, mentally aware, psychologically strong, and sexually confident.

In Angelou's work different experiences and achievements from her own life are illustrated; being raped by her mother's boyfriend and even worse bearing the guilt of his death, followed by her intentional muteness which meant her isolation, ending up by finding consolation in literature, and the feeling of being in control and superior that she maintained despite the prejudices. Not only that Angelou was not afraid of being responsible during the time of the civil rights movement; which was more than tough for a woman to handle, but she also took the risk to challenge taboos such as sexual liberties for Afro-Americans and women in particular, in a time congested by sexual intolerance and racial hatred. On the other hand crimes against Afro-Americans such as that of the assassination of her close friend Martin Luther King Jr only made her more determined. Finally, Maya Angelou in her wild and unstoppable struggle against racism and sexism proved herself as a Black woman to be good enough if not better than her white or male counterparts.

Lastly, it is through this project that we detected the exclusive use of references like "I" and "We" –expressing the self and the entity– to create a unity of people living under similar gender discriminating state; the thing that supported our conception about the presence of feminism as well as healthy psychological state. We have also experienced that literature can be used to evoke emotions of acceptance in people, by manipulating their feelings through how the language is used; starting by the implication of the title itself.

When someone decides to fight against the social and cultural obstacles by bringing the taboos out in the open, it is a point of no return, either for that individual, or for the ones causing the upheaval. Angelou, being not only black, not only a woman, not only a feminist, not only an experienced mentor and educator, not only a courageous person who dares to speak words never spoken before, but by being everything at the same time, had a huge

influence on how the society changed in a much more moderate way than before. Moreover, these actions were not of a personal benefit to her, but for the good of a huge amount of people living under the same umbrella. All of these aspects and reasons combined is what makes Maya Angelou an Empowered Woman par excellence.

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